

POLS JOIN UNITE VERSUS GAP

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By Kristi Ellis

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WASHINGTON -- Vowing to embarrass Gap Inc., several House lawmakers joined with UNITE on Thursday in calling for the company to improve its working conditions at contractors that sew its labels abroad.

Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D., N.Y.) said at a Capitol Hill press conference that she would introduce legislation aimed at forcing apparel companies to disclose where they make their clothing and the conditions under which they are made. Velazquez, along with other House lawmakers, also released a copy of a letter they plan to send to Millard S. Drexler, president and chief executive officer of Gap. Dubbed "The Garment Consumer's Right to Know Act of 2002," the legislation would require manufacturers to collect, maintain and disclose information regarding where, by whom and under what conditions their products were made, including products made in whole or in part by contractors or subcontractors in the U.S. and abroad. It will also enable employees to bring legal action for violations and entitle them to compensation.

UNITE, which is working with labor unions and worker rights organizations in Lesotho and Central America to highlight the alleged plight of workers in Gap contracting facilities, aired a videotape with interviews of a Lesotho woman and a plant manager who allegedly stabbed her with a pair of scissors at the end of March, and repeated its call for Gap executives to take responsibility.

The garment worker's union has taken its campaign from New York in February to Gap's annual meeting in Albuquerque, N.M., last week to Capitol Hill. Steve Weingarten, director of industrial relations at UNITE, said getting Gap to disclose its contractors is a key goal of the union.

In their letter to Drexler, 11 House lawmakers, including Jan Schakowsky (D., Ill.), Sherrod Brown (D., Ohio), Hilda Solis (D., Calif.) and Velazquez, called on Gap to take immediate action to improve working conditions, pay living wages and ensure the right to organize.

Refuting the charges, a Gap spokeswoman said in a phone interview that the San Francisco-based company has been working "vigorously" on the issues, more recently with factory management in Lesotho, but also in El Salvador and Guatemala. She said Gap's senior director of global compliance has met with the victim in Lesotho, as well as with managers at the Nien Hsing factory, and Gap is awaiting the outcome of a criminal investigation of the incident.

"We have taken a number of steps and made recommendations with the vendor," she said. "We

suggested the managing director, who said [the stabbing] was not intentional, should be removed and we also identified a local mediator who should be brought in to improve the relationship between management and employees."

She noted that if a factory does not comply with Gap's global compliance program, the company will terminate business at that factory. The retailer has a staff of 90 compliance officers whose job it is to ensure that the 3,600 factories in 50 countries that produce Gap goods obey its code of vendor conduct.

She said: "It is very frustrating to be singled out," and added that "achieving significant progress in factory workplaces ought to be an industrywide effort."